Avian Influenza FAQ'S

Q: What is avian influenza?

A: Avian influenza (AI) is a virus that is naturally found in waterfowl and some species of shorebirds.

Avian influenza is broadly divided into highly pathogenic (HPAI) and low pathogenic (LPAI) strains based on its ability to cause disease in poultry. Low pathogenic avian influenza is a natural infection of waterfowl that may cause minimal to no signs of disease in domestic poultry and wild birds.

Due to stringent biosecurity practices, avian influenza is uncommon in most commercial poultry flocks in the United States; it is most often identified in poultry raised outdoors or those that intermingle with or are exposed to wild birds or their droppings.

Additional information can be found on the USDA's Avian Influenza Disease page as well as the Georgia Department of Agriculture's Avian Influenza page.

Q: How is avian influenza transmitted?

A: Avian influenza is most often spread by direct contact between infected birds and healthy birds. It may also be spread indirectly through contact with contaminated equipment and biological excretions (droppings). Contact with contaminated droppings is the most common means of bird-to-bird transmission, although airborne secretions are another important means of transmission, especially within poultry houses. Droppings from wild ducks can introduce avian influenza into domestic flocks raised on range or in open flight pens.

The spread of avian influenza between poultry facilities almost always results from the movement of infected birds or contaminated people and equipment (including clothing, boots, and vehicles).

Highly pathogenic avian influenza can be spread from birds to people as a result of extensive direct contact with infected birds, such as during home slaughter or defeathering of infected poultry.

Q: How can I detect avian influenza in my flock?

A: Low pathogenic avian influenza can resemble any other mild respiratory disease (noise, swollen faces, conjunctivitis). In egg layers or breeding birds, egg production drops and eggshells may be soft. With HPAI, birds may become quiet, not eat and drink, have diarrhea, and have discolored combs and feet. Birds may also die suddenly with no signs of disease.

Q: What do I do if I think my flock might have avian influenza?

A: Testing for AI is free through the Georgia Poultry Lab Network. Call the AI Hot line 770-766-6850 or go online to gapoultrylab.org/avian-influenza-hotline.

Q: How do I prevent Avian Influenza in my backyard flock?

A: Use dedicated footwear and wash your hands when tending your flock. Do not let poultry drink untreated water from lakes and ponds. Do not let waterfowl become residents close to small domestic flocks. Do not come into direct contact with your flocks if you have seen birds in another country or been involved with hunting, or in contact with any other birds (zoos, auctions, flea markets, live bird markets). Do not come into contact with your flock or other flocks after hunting wild birds.

Q: Can I get avian influenza from eating poultry or eggs?

A: You cannot get avian influenza from eggs and poultry products that have been prepared and cooked properly.

Q: Can animals "shed" the virus without clinical signs?

A: Yes. "Shedding," as it applies to viruses, means that the animal's secretions and/or droppings contain viral particles that may infect other animals or people. Some animals (i.e., growing poultry) rapidly show clinical signs of disease and simultaneously shed virus. Other animals, including some species of waterfowl, may appear clinically healthy, but are shedding the virus, which is the reason that surveillance of waterfowl for early detection of influenza viruses along the major flyways is an important measure to prevent outbreaks of disease in commercial poultry.

Q: Is it safe to move my birds?

A: Please contact the Georgia Department of Agriculture or the Department of Agriculture in the state of destination to ensure that your birds meet all entry requirements before departing.

Q: How stable are avian influenzas in the environment?

A: Avian influenza viruses are generally sensitive to most detergents and disinfectants, and heating and drying will inactivate them. However, avian influenza viruses can persist in soil, feces, and pond water for varying amounts of time, depending on environmental conditions.

Q: What are you doing to monitor the spread of Avian Influenza?

A: Currently, federal and state avian influenza surveillance programs are in place for wild birds and poultry, and these programs are key to early detection of novel strains that could be problematic for animals and/or people. This surveillance by veterinarians, animal health officials, and industry are critical, because early detection can help prevent novel influenza viruses from becoming transmitted to, and established, in people. There is also international sharing of surveillance data, which keeps veterinarians and animal health officials informed about emerging novel strains around the world. Find the most up to date surveillance information here.

Q: What is being done to stop avian influenza from spreading in birds?

A: In situations where highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) infects poultry, the birds are humanely depopulated by properly trained and protected crews on site to reduce the risk of infecting other birds and to minimize human exposure. Note that if euthanasia was not performed, many infected chickens and turkeys would continue to needlessly suffer and die. The U.S. maintains an indemnity program that has helped minimize losses to poultry producers and encouraged their participation in surveillance activities.

The USDA recommends six steps to help keep birds safe:

- Step 1: Keep your distance
- Step 2: Keep it clean.
- Step 3: Don't haul disease home.
- Step 4: Don't borrow from your neighbor.
- Step 5: Know the signs.
- Step 6: Report sick birds.